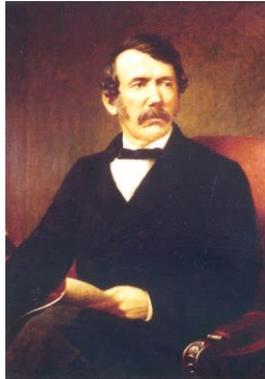


David Livingstone (1813-1873)

by Arthur Fraser

Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches (EFCC), UK



Dr David Livingstone has had bad press of late. He has been accused of hypocrisy, self-righteousness and ruthlessness in pursuing his own aims; in short, a man with whom it was almost impossible to work. Are these charges justified? And did he, as some claim, abandon true missionary work to become an explorer?

It must be conceded that Livingstone had difficult, even turbulent, relationships with fellow missionaries, not least his in-laws, Dr Robert and Mrs Mary Moffat. In one strongly-worded letter to her son-in-law, Mary signed off “in great perturbation.” When his sending body, the London Missionary Society, would not support his plan to pioneer a new route across Africa, he resigned from it “without a pang.” On his own admission, Livingstone was fiercely independent. Perhaps this trait owed something to his native Highland stock, for although he was reared in the Scottish Lowlands, the family’s ancestral home was the small island of Ulva just off Mull. Whatever the explanation, his independence, coupled with a strong visionary spirit, made him the exceptional man he was.

Finney’s influence

Blantyre, his birthplace, was where he worked from the age of 10 in the local textile factory. Books placed on the spinning-jenny were read through at no longer than a minute at a time, a feat of patience and perseverance which foreshadowed his exploits in later life. Soon after his conversion to Christ at the age of 20, his father Neil, in protest against the patronage system, led the whole family out of the Church of Scotland to join the independent Congregational Chapel at Hamilton. The move was a mixed blessing for Livingstone. Several of the educated members of the chapel, who were in touch with theologians in America, introduced him to the writings of Charles G Finney whose Arminian views coloured his own reformed outlook. In a letter, he once urged a minister friend to read Finney’s works, adding that “ministers... must adapt . . . to save souls, and if sinners are not saved the blame is theirs.” It is salutary to note that he himself could claim only one conversion in the whole of his time in Africa.

Achievements

What then of his achievements? Was he the failure that some have made him out to be? It seems appropriate in this bicentenary year of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to focus first on his crucial role in ending the African slave trade. Nearly 50 years before Livingstone went to Africa (in 1841), William Wilberforce recognised that legitimate commerce would be the most effective way of stamping out slavery in Africa. Thomas

Buxton, Wilberforce's successor, sharpened this conviction in a speech made in London at a meeting which Livingstone himself attended prior to his departure for Africa. The much-criticised and misunderstood remark he made in a speech at Cambridge University, that he was returning to Africa "to make an open path for commerce and Christianity," has to be read in that light. From his standpoint, it was emphatically not a reversal of his priorities. He was simply stating the accepted thinking of the time. An immediate effect of his explorations was to expose to the world the full horrors of African slavery, especially as practised by the Arab traders. In one terrible massacre at Nyangwe, some 400 people, mostly women and children, were slaughtered. This dreadful event gave him "the impression of being in hell." His first-hand accounts made a profound impact on opinion back home, and soon led to the stamping out of this hideous trade on the African continent.

Africa opened to the gospel

But his achievements go very much further. Through his pioneering travels, he truly opened up Africa to the Gospel. Within a decade of his death, mission stations were established in present-day Malawi at Livingstonia and Blantyre. The opening up of Christian work in Uganda, Congo and elsewhere, plus the planting of medical missions, can all be traced directly to his inspiration and influence. On reading the words, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold . . ." engraved on his tomb, Peter Scott was profoundly moved, an experience which proved to be the seed of the African Inland Mission.

Livingstone died a lonely death in an attitude of prayer at his bedside in the heart of the continent he came to love. Figuratively, the seed fell into the ground and died, but it produced much fruit in accordance with the words of Christ. Whatever the failings of this great man – and, yes, he had many – this is how he is to be ultimately judged. When the servant follows his Master, a harvest is sure.

A noble work

This truth was beautifully expressed in a message to Livingstone's daughter by Lord Polwarth: "His memory will never perish. . . his prayers will be had in everlasting remembrance, and unspeakable blessings will yet flow to that vast continent he opened up at the expense of his life. God called and qualified him for a noble work, which, by grace, he nobly fulfilled, and we can love the honoured servant, and adore the gracious Master."

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